

RED-TAILED HAWK DIES WITH CORAL SNAKE IN TALONS.—Controversy over the coral snake mimicry complex has focused on the adaptive value of the red, black, and yellow-ringed color pattern (Dunn, 1954; Brattstrom, 1955; Greene and McDiarmid, 1981). Evidence of innate avoidance of the color pattern by potential avian predators (Smith, 1975; 1977) provided an important argument in support of the hypothesis that the coral snake color pattern is aposematic. Direct field observation of predator avoidance of coral snakes or their putative mimics is difficult, although several observations of avian predation on coral snakes and other red-and-black ringed snakes have been reported (Table 1). That innate avoidance may not always occur, however, is suggested by the following observation.

I observed an adult male Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) die with a partially eaten female Eastern Coral Snake (*Micrurus fulvius*) in his talons. The incident occurred on 10 Jan.

a decreased avoidance response to the coral snake color pattern because of limited geographic and temporal overlap of northern populations of Red-tailed Hawks with the more southerly distributed Eastern Coral Snakes. Alternatively, Red-tailed Hawks might not avoid coral snakes. Conceivably, some hawks might successfully prey upon coral snakes if they obtain immediate control of the head and neck. Further support of the argument that hawks or other visually-oriented predators may prey upon *Micrurus* is found in the defensive behavior common to fossorial and semi-fossorial snakes. When attacked, a coral snake will bury its head, coil the tip of its tail into a ball and wave it around in a distracting display (Greene and Seib 1983). That this behavior is easily elicited suggests ongoing predation pressure on coral snakes.

This observation, coupled with other reports of avian predation on coral snakes (Table 1) and the conjecture that "... diurnal, predaceous birds ... as a group may be the most significant predators on Eastern Coral Snakes ..." (Jackson and Franz, 1981) suggests that not all potential predators exhibit innate avoidance of coral snake color patterns. Further study is needed to determine incidence and extent of innate avoidance of coral snake color patterns by a range of potential predators.

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